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ABSTRACT

The approach taken by two English-as-a-Second-Language teachers at the American University in Cairo (Egypt) in intensive courses for university-bound students is described. The approach is characterized by continuous communication between teachers, with the objective of providing constant reinforcement of those skills. Focus is on how two teachers teaching different skills (reading, writing, grammar, study skills) to the same students on different schedules can communicate with each other on skill integration. A system of message transmission using a desktop file is described. Both teachers organize themes for the semester and gather teaching materials from newspapers and magazines, passing the materials to each other so that each can determine their appropriateness for different skills being taught. Materials are renewed throughout the semester. Agreed-upon materials are coded and copied for student use. The materials are first used for reading instruction. Work produced by students is then passed between teachers, with notes attached, to facilitate communication about what is being addressed in class. Similarly, communication about activities in grammar and study skills classes is made using the file system. It is concluded that while this approach requires more work on each teacher's part, it is more effective. (MSE)

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ED 397 677

INTEGRATION OF SKILLS: COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COLLEAGUES

presented at TESOL, Long Beach 1995
by Virginia Stevens

Authors: Virginia Stevens and Becky Taylor

Introduction

Several years ago, my colleague, Becky Taylor, and I read an e-mail plea asking for some ideas on how to integrate ESL at the university level. Becky and I had been teaching together for several semesters in the English Language Institute at the American University in Cairo, and had been working on having spontaneous communication between us so that as many lessons as possible would interlink in order for the students to get constant reinforcement from each aspect of their work.

Not much had been written in professional journals on integrating skills at this level. So, Becky and I started writing down each step we took, in order to share our organizational system for the integration of ESL skills at the university level.

Background of our students

Our students have mostly an upper class, Arabic language background, and most have attended German, French or English language schools. Yet, their English is not good enough , based on an entrance exam, to take regular university classes in English. Our classes in the English Language Institute are intensive. The students take 5 hours of English a day, and are expected to do about 3 hours a day of homework. These hours are non-credit, and consist of grammar, composition, reading, vocabulary, and listening-note taking.

By the end of one semester the students have the opportunity to take a test which will allow them to become regular university students. These 5 classes are usually taught by two teachers, sometimes by 3 or 4. It would be possible for the teachers of the same students never to see each other. So Becky and I set up a communication system, for integrating the skills.

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Difficulty of integrating

Of course it is not easy to set up a system of integration. It takes time to bother to think of the other teacher. The ELI did try to facilitate this by inserting a free hour into the middle of the day every other Thursday, especially for teachers to talk to each other about integration. This helped, both time-wise and for the moral support.

Teachers must be matched with someone whose style doesn't clash with theirs. Their methodologies should compliment each other as they attempt to plan and carry out integration. Both teachers have to have the conviction that it's worth it, since it's a responsibility for both teachers to be committed. The students could get bored by always dealing with the same topics. The cure for this is that we do one theme per week, limiting the dosage so it's powerful and focused.

Organization of the themes

First, both teachers organize the themes for the semester, according to the ELI coordinator's comp topics and a list of academic reading passage topics. Then I read newspapers and magazines, and cut out the articles which would be good for composition, and give them to Becky to decide if they would also be good for reading. We do this throughout the semester, continually revising our supply of articles.

The reason we do this is that it provides some culturally appropriate reading materials. It brings the students up to date on current events. It gives the students the English for the ideas they may already have in Arabic. It provides some authentic reading, taken from both native and non-native writers, and prepares the students for readings in academic classes.

Next, Becky chooses the best articles and judges if any new articles should replace any old ones. Then she cuts and pastes articles for photocopying, gets a code no. , and orders a class set from the secretaries. By doing this, she starts a file of the articles according to themes, for the other teachers to use as well.

System for communication

We give these articles to each other by each having a confidential message file on our desk in which we can put articles,

papers, and private messages for each other. This enables us to quickly pass information back and forth so that we can try always to handle any potential problems before they start.

This system allows us to be united in our ideas before facing the class, so no energy is wasted on contradictions and clarifications. An advantage of using the confidential folder is that the students know we communicate with each other, so they can't play off one of us against the other, as in "we have too much homework in the other class, so don't give us any tonight."

This folder works better than using a pigeon hole mailbox for three reasons. First, other people may rifle through the mail box at any time, and we may want to leave notes about the behavior of students that's too personal for public information. Second, the folder is on top of each of our desks, so we are likely to see it sooner than if we had to go to the mailbox. We can quickly skim the note in the folder on our desk before we run off to the next class. Third, after skimming the note, we can leave it in the confidential folder to be dealt with later, rather that have to take time to hunt for a place to file it, as we would if we had taken the note from the mailbox.

We tried using e-mail for our messages. In our English Language Institute we have set up a system where we have one e-mail machine in every teachers' room. We have agreed that we would use e-mail for important memos, so that we could cut down on the photocopying costs. Memos could also be sent out much faster this way.

Using e-mail for memos has worked out fine, except for the confidential info Becky and I pass to each other. We have found that it takes longer to open the e-mail account than to quickly glance in the folder between classes.

Integrating reading and composition

Becky begins the procedure with the students. To introduce a reading to the class, she uses a list the teachers have compiled of possible composition topics. This list has been grouped by themes, such as generation, personalities, environment, education, values, etc. An example of a question under a theme of education might be" Some schools are coeducational, with males and females attending the same classes, whereas other schools prefer to keep the two sexes apart in the classroom. What are the advantages of each system?" The students do not have access to this list of

possible topics, but the teachers can use it to mold their lesson around it.

Becky introduces a new reading by trying to awaken the students' interest in a pre-reading activity by getting them to think of questions about a theme, and she guides them to consider the questions that could later come up in the composition class and then in the composition exam. Students should jot down these questions, in order to think about them, in the comp section of their binder.

We want the comp teacher to be different from the reading teacher, so that the students will have an audience for their comp who has not already discussed the ideas with them. The readings also can be used in composition class to practice punctuation. For example, after an article about euthanasia, we did a lot of practice with "It's not OK to pull the plug, according to Crawford, especially if there's hope. This particular expression, "pull the plug" is also good for practicing the p sound.

Since we teachers are communicating these steps to each other without even seeing each other, each reading is numbered consecutively for quick reference by both the teachers and the students. A student in the reading class is in charge of taking an extra copy of each article and putting it at the beginning of class into a special file which I always have with me

Integrating reading and grammar

When I get back to my desk, I can look over the reading the student has put in the special folder in order to know what the students have started to work on, and note grammatical problems which can be discussed in grammar class. For example, if the theme is the problems of the future, the grammar class can cover the future and future perfect verb tenses. If the topic is culture shock, the grammar class can cover the expressions "used to" and "be used to" which give every student such a hard time. Then the readings from Becky's class are filed in one folder especially for that. At the same time, we use the confidential folder on our desk to communicate messages quickly about what is happening in the other class.

Integrating reading and study skills

One part of the study skills class is our "live lectures" where professors from other departments in the university come and

lecture to our entire ELI group of students. So, Becky does a reading in preparation for those lectures, such as an article on recycling, where the lecture will be about the special recycling of garbage done by Cairo's garbage men. If there isn't time to plan ahead, because the "live lecture" speaker tells us the topic at the last minute, then we use our "communication" folder to inform the other of what is going on.

Another way we can integrate the study skills and reading class is if Becky teaches the use of the dictionary in reading class. The dictionary work is so tied to reading, vocabulary, and study skills that we divide the responsibilities. Then, the days that the dictionary is required in reading are the days the dictionary can be used in comp class, etc., so whoever is using the dictionary lets the other teacher know.

I do an activity in Study Skills class, such as an oral discussion on the live lecture, or a debate or a situation conflict role play, or an oral presentation by a student, or we use the library. We also listen to a tape on a similar topic, or have sample comps taped so students can take notes, or have the students tape a corrected comp, each on a different topic, on which their classmates take notes . The purpose is to get ideas and vocabulary and to develop logical organizational skills.

The students can type up their ideas generated in reading class, as well as in composition class and/or in the study skills class in the CALL lab, in order to publish it in the ELI magazine. This way they learn quickly the value of the computer for revising. We both share a set of disks that we reuse semester after semester. We keep enough numbered disks so that each student has his own to use in a matching numbered computer.

Integrating composition and grammar

The composition class can also be linked with the grammar classes. For example, when correcting a set of compositions, a list can be made of grammar errors. Then the sentences with the errors can be written on the board during grammar class, and the students can try to point out the reason for the error. For instance, the students know the simple past tense very well in grammar class, but when writing a comp they forget to use this tense.

Another example is the misuse of the "s" on a verb following a modal, where they need to go from grammar class to composition and back to grammar again.

Integrating composition and study skills

We link the composition class with the study skills class by giving an assignment to write an outline, which will then be written later as a composition. In Study Skills we can concentrate on logical organization. This outline could be based on an article from the reading class, or it could be a previously written comp which is now to be used to write an outline.

Integrating grammar and study skills

The grammar and study skills classes can also be linked. For example, students can learn verb tenses in grammar class, and then act out the verbs in study skills class, to get them used to talking in front of a group in preparation for oral presentations.

Integrating composition and vocabulary

After various readings on one theme have been dealt with in Becky's reading class for about a week, then I choose a comp topic to be written in comp class. Before assigning a topic, I might let Becky know what the coming question will be so that she can generate vocabulary to use in the comp during her vocabulary class. For example, Becky teaches a word such as "addiction" in her vocabulary class. If a student uses it in a composition, I recognize it as coming from the reading, and underline it in green. The students know that if I underline a word in green, they are getting special recognition for using good vocabulary correctly.

Vocabulary dictation sentences with commas can be done in vocabulary class at the same time as they are being reinforced in composition class.

Everything comes together in the composition class, when a composition is assigned on the topics best covered by the articles in reading class. The students write two comps a week. The classes in between are lessons on how to write. On one of the two comps, they are allowed to ask the teacher or each other for help. During this time, when the students can ask questions, I write down on the blackboard all the words they ask me to spell as they ask them, so they can visualize the complete word, and so the other students can have access to those words. One of the students

is in charge of copying these words at the end of class on a paper which is later given to Becky. This gives us a list of vocabulary the students have trouble spelling according to a theme, for their study use later.

Becky then takes the list of words that caused spelling difficulties during the writing of the comp, and plays a game in vocabulary class to reinforce these words. The students love to play a game, especially girls vs. boys. This list of spelling difficulties could also be taken to the CALL lab and used for typing practice, just for variety.

For composition correction we use a handbook which contains explanations for almost all the grammar errors Arabic-speaking students make in their English writing, with codes for each problem. I have made exercises for each of the most common mistakes, using sentences from student comps. These exercises have been authored for practice in the CALL lab.

Sometimes I correct the comps with the students at my desk. They learn more this way, than when the entire class is present. I keep a record of problems discussed with the students by the date. I use a carbon paper so the student also has a record of the things they should study. This list is also useful if I ever want to explain to a parent how the student has made progress. I could also use these notes from student conferences to work on in grammar class. The codes from the handbook can also be referred to in grammar class.

Conclusion

The students' final version of the composition goes either on a bulletin board or in their student magazine, or can be passed around in reading class. This gives the rewrite a purpose. However, as we said at the beginning, the integration of skills requires a lot more work than if each teacher just did his or her own thing. Yet Becky and I feel that the effort is justified. The students retain more from all this reinforcement. They have a schema to plug the information into. You can dig deeper into the topic because they have the vocabulary and the ideas that can provide more than a superficial treatment of the concept. Class unity is generated. Teachers are exemplifying unity, because students know that they are working together. Perhaps the most important advantage of all is that this system allows us to brainstorm together, and then change what we see doesn't work, so that we have more satisfying classes.